

# A Conversation with Xu Bing

Conducted by Padma Kaimal and Joachim Homann  
Colgate University, November 10, 2008  
Translated by Jing Wang

**Joachim Homann:** Colgate University owns about 200 Chinese woodcut prints from the 1930s and 1940s. For a long time, they have not been appreciated much because of political controversies. It is only now in a time of globalization and of rising interest in China that we realize how important they are and how they can help us to understand Chinese history and art. You started this year as the vice president of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, your alma mater. As a student, you participated in the program of the printmaking department. Long before you created concept-based art you were really trying to push the boundaries in the printmaking department of what was acceptable under the very strict rules. Could you tell us about the printmaking department that you encountered in the late 1970s and early 1980s and about your work as an echo of or response to that environment?

**Xu Bing:** When I first applied to the Central Academy of Fine Arts, I really wanted to study oil painting. Print-making was not as popular or well regarded by ordinary people and the national Chinese ink painting was too provincial. But the application process was such that they had already pre-decided who was going to do what, so they assigned me to the printmaking department. At that time I didn't quite know, but actually I learned later, that printmaking in China was a very important field. In retrospect, having majored in printmaking was sort of a fate but I was also very fortunate. A lot of excellent artists in China graduated from the printmaking department, including those artists who are most productive in oil painting and

other kinds of fine arts. Some scholars are now interested in finding out why and how the printmaking department produced so many outstanding artists working in different media. The training that students undergo in print art is very closely related to the material. That aspect connects printmaking to contemporary art forms more directly than other traditional artistic media. A key concept in print art is repetition, and repetition is related to all facets of contemporary life. Contemporary media such as video, TV, computer, a lot of things we see, are repetitions and as such I see them as innately similar to print art.

**Padma Kaimal:** Are you talking about the "age of mechanical reproduction"? The notion that everything is a copy of some other thing?

**XB:** Yes, you are right. There is an intimate relationship between printmaking and modern civilization. Everything looks alike anywhere in the world: the same lights, cables, they are the same. That aspect of life and art has intensified in the age of industrial production and in the digital age.

**JH:** In one of the prints you have allowed us to exhibit in our show, dated to 1977-1979, you are actually showing villagers coming together for a movie screening (*A Movie Tonight*, pl. 18). We were talking about woodcuts and new media. In this print, both are coming together. I read it as a comment on the media of communication that were available to the country at that time.

from WOODCUTS  
IN MODERN CHINA  
1937-2008:  
TOWARDS A UNIVERSAL  
PICTORIAL LANGUAGE  
JOACHIM HOMANN, ed.  
PICKER ART GALLERY  
COLGATE UNIV.  
8 009



Plate 18. Xu Bing, *A Movie Tonight*, from *Broken Jade* series, 1977-1979 (cat. 18)



Fig. 3: Xu Bing in conversation with Colgate University students and faculty, November 2008

**XB:** A main feature of printmaking is its use of material. Oil painting is more classical, printmaking is more related to the physical contemporary world. That's the main feature of print art that has imprinted the way of thinking of printmakers: that makes them different from other artists.

**PK:** In that way printmaking serves your interests in creating an art that is global in scope, that is not limited to the particular histories of one part of the world.

**XB:** My more recent works use multimedia and installation. They transfer the ways of thinking and features of print art to other media. Examples include the *Book from the Sky* (fig. 4), even some performances, *Ghost Pounding the Wall* (fig. 5), the work with animals. Even the piece *Where Does the Dust Itself Collect?* (fig. 7). I am blowing the dust into the space and then I put

a stencil on the ground. Then the dust is falling down to the ground and after I remove the stencil the text is visible. I think in some ways this is related to the prints.

**PK:** The stencils on the floor, and the stamps on the skin of the pigs.

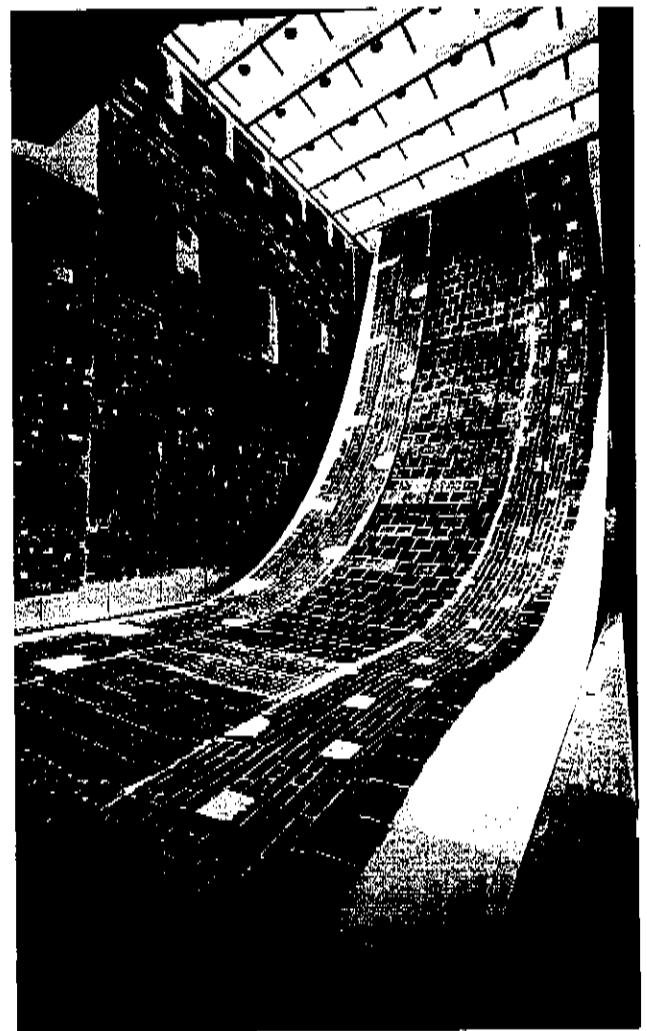
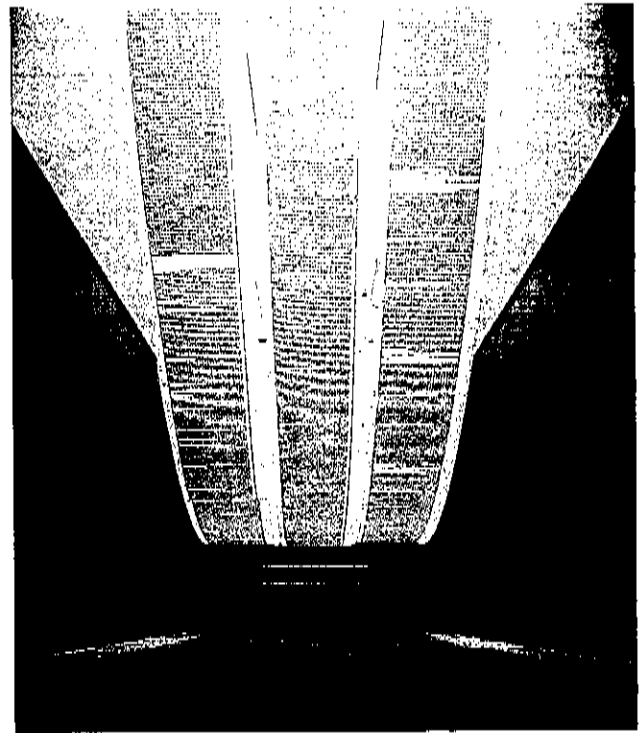
**Jing Wang:** The dust piece is also very Zen. I am wondering if you want to talk about that.

**XB:** In a nutshell, a lot of my work is related to traditional Chinese culture and ancient cultures of the East, and Zen is a part of that. To come back to my period at the Central Academy: my generation of printmakers is very fortunate. When we enrolled, many members of the first generation of print artists were still there and they were our teachers. The sight of the woodcuts in the Herman collection is very

*Top Fig. 4: Xu Bing, Book from the Sky (Tianshu), 1987-1991. Hand-printed books, ceiling and wall scrolls with character blocks. Installation at the Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1991.*

*Bottom Fig. 5: Xu Bing, Ghosts Pounding the Wall, 1990. Mixed media installation: transferred print from Great Wall, paper, ink. Installation at the Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1990.*

heartwarming for me because I am, in a lot of ways, directly related to the people who created such works. These prints are also important historic material and now they are collected by American museums here and there. The first course I took at the Central Academy was an introduction to woodcutting skills taught by Professor Li Hua. The professor always liked to sit across the table from me and each time I applied the knife the professor would look at it and nod and I would do another one and he nodded again. It was a particularly happy time for me. There was a certain energy in the air that connected two generations of artists. One important reason that I experienced it as a happy time was that these older artists distinguished themselves not only because of their art but also because of their character. So what they taught were artistic skills as well as certain attitudes towards art, and a certain way of conducting yourself as an artist and as a human being. Professor Gu Yuan did not teach me directly because he was the president of the Academy. But when I finished the class with Professor Li Hua, I produced more than 100 small prints using the different skills I had learned and those prints were shown to Professor Gu Yuan (pl. 16, 17, 18). He was very impressed and delighted, and gave me lots of encouragement. Most of the works produced then were very small. When they were published, Professor Gu Yuan inscribed the colophon for the book. In regard to the art work of Professor Gu Yuan, I think that he is one of the very best artists in China, next to Qi Baishi (1864-1957). I make this evaluation because artists before them were all quite conservative. A typical example would be the school of the "Four Wangs" of the early Qing dynasty.<sup>1</sup>



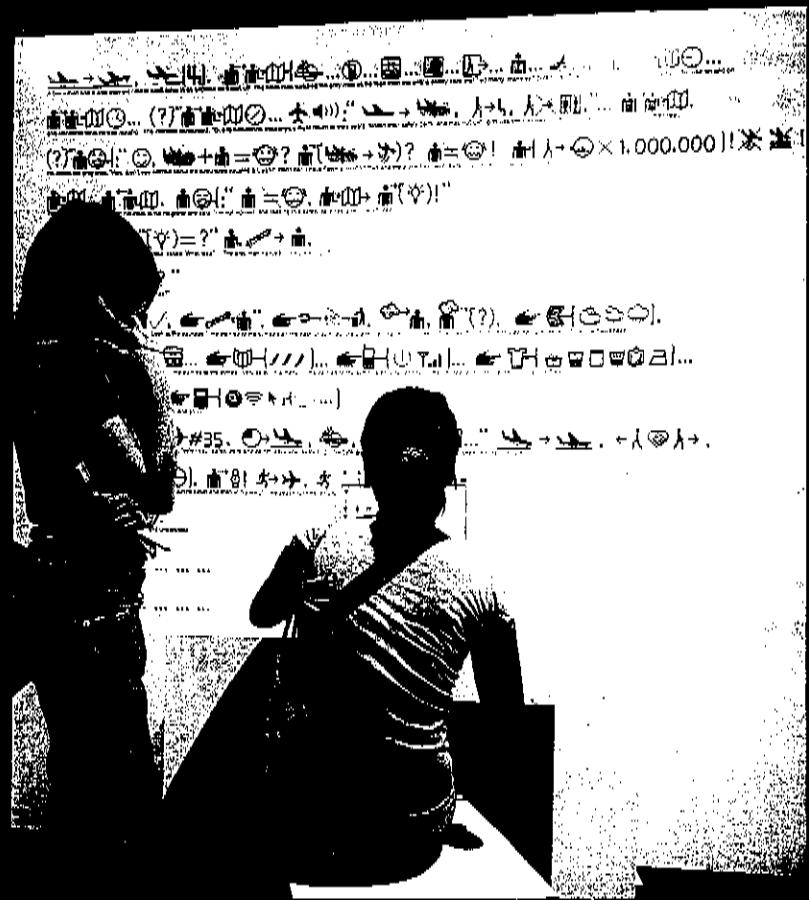
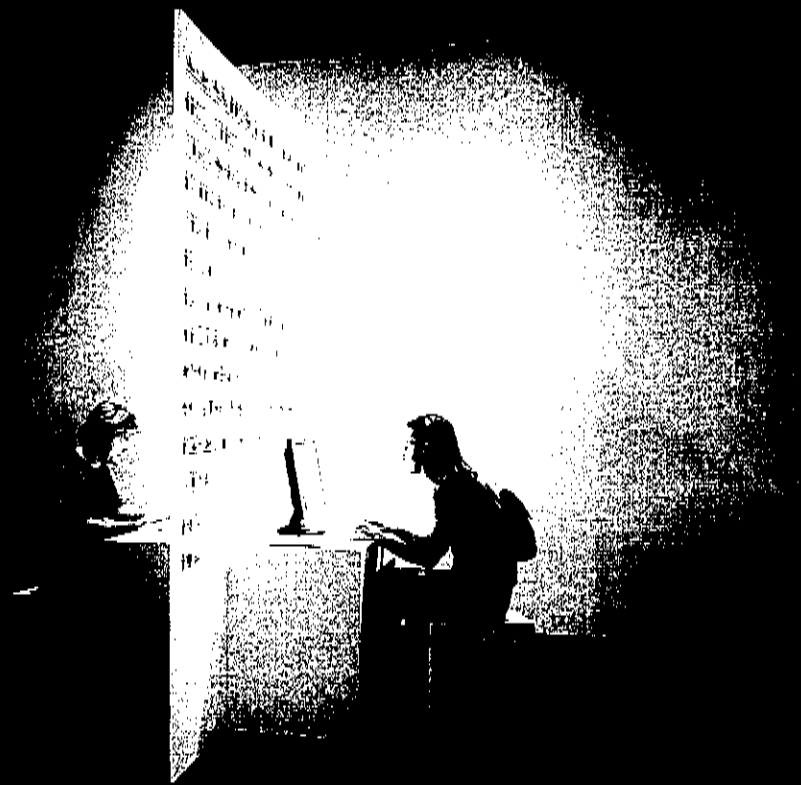




Plate 20: Gu Yuan, *Winter School*, 1940 (cat. 10)

**JH:** Speaking about Gu Yuan, I would like to bring to your attention one of his prints that interests me particularly because it seems to refer to reeducating the Chinese in using the Latin alphabet for writing Chinese. It is called *Winter School* (pl. 20).

**XB:** Much of Professor Gu Yuan's work was produced in the spirit of Mao Zedong's "Talks on Literature and Art," delivered in Yan'an in 1942. His art was very much related to the historical time and embodies the idea that as art comes from reality, art comes from life. During the period that Mao's forces were in Yan'an, one of the important cultural things they were doing was to help the peasant population to become literate. In the print the peasants were writing alphabet, pinyin, that is. The new culture movement in Yan'an at that time attempted to simplify writing and make it accessible to the peasants. This is one of the early pieces by Gu Yuan and one of its features that we see is deep shading in some faces. At that time when Gu Yuan produced the print, he would show it to peasants and ask them for their opinions, in particular whether his representation of peasants was true to life. A lot of the peasants did not feel very positive about these pieces. They were asking why there was so much black in the picture and

particularly in the faces. After that he started adopting the visual languages of the New Year's prints (*nianhua*) and the lines of traditional painting. This piece of work, Gu Yuan's *Marriage Registration* (pl. 45), is an experiment in learning from traditional and folk arts. Afterwards the style of Gu Yuan's art somewhat changed. *Marriage Registration* came after *Winter School*. A main feature in the later print is the use of the traditional Chinese outlining and less shadow, that had been an influence of Western art.

**JH:** This print has a little pictogram in there, too. People were writing letters on the wall, but they were also drawing pictograms. This reminds me of your venture into pictograms in your *Book from the Ground* (pl. 19) as a mode of communication. Talking about the founding generation of woodcut artists, we have stressed their interest in reaching out to the illiterate, speaking to peasants, soldiers, and workers. You have often expressed that it is important for you to make "art for the people."

**XB:** Yes, these things are very much related. Much of my recent work wants to be accessible to ordinary people and comprehensible to those who are not

trained in the arts. That's a gesture of inviting the audience to be part of the art and to participate more easily. A good example is the *Book from the Ground*. I have based that book on a lot of the signs and icons I have collected around the globe. Using those signs, the book is supposed to be legible to everybody whether you are educated or uneducated, whether you are from China or elsewhere. Your cultural background doesn't matter anymore. That art is very useful outside of the museum and outside the world of art because it has a way of reproducing itself. A good thing is that the book can be published in any language without translation.

**PK:** You are finding now positive ways to say something you were also saying in the *Book from the Sky*. *Book from the Sky* says where communication fails and obstacles arise, and now *Book from the Ground* still talks about communication but looks for ways in which communication can succeed.

**XB:** That's a very good observation. *The Book from the Sky*, *Square Word Calligraphy* (fig. 6), and *Book from the Ground* are connected by one important clue. Although they are different works, they are intricately related to each other because they make everybody equal in front of these works of art. For example, the *Book from the Sky* pretends to deal with something very difficult and no one can understand it. The *Book from the Ground* deals with something very easy that everyone can understand. So we are all made equal in both cases. These works are supposed to be more and more accessible, that is a continuum along which they have moved. Whatever it is that truly belongs to an artist, your own idea, your true idea about art, will become more and more visible in your work. There are a number of factors that are very important to understand these works. Among them are the traditional Chinese philosophy and the traditional Chinese ways of wisdom. In one way or

another they are present in here. For example, communication between the artist and the audience, and that happens through the spirit of Zen. Another factor that feeds my art is socialist art, including art during the Cultural Revolution. The socialist idea that art serves the people plays an important role in my art. That part of my background becomes very strong in my work. This part of my biography is just not avoidable; I can't escape from it. It necessarily comes out in my work since it is part of my personality and part of my thinking and of seeing the world. During the Cultural Revolution, many ideas about art were very problematic. Yet, on the other hand, it doesn't make sense to negate all the work that has been produced in that period. Otherwise we would have nothing left. An important thing for us to do now is to look back at that period of time and try to figure out what was there, what was valuable to us then, and what is valuable now. There were a lot of things then that were hateful, not very good. What we need to do now is to dig under the surface, try to see to the ground and see if we find anything worth preserving. My participation in the contemporary western art scene is often characterized by what comes from my cultural background, and that background is very helpful. It enables me to see in the system and ways of contemporary western art some of the issues and problems that I would not have seen otherwise.

**JH:** Thank you for giving us this tour d'horizon of your work.

**PK:** Thank you. You taught us very much.

1 Translator's note: Xu Bing refers to Wang Shimin (1592-1680), Wang Jian (1598-1677), Wang Yuanqi (1642-1715), and Wang Hui (1632-1717). They imitated the ancients and did not show much creativity, but became the so-called orthodox school because they were favored by the emperor. They were influential for the next three hundred years.

Fig. 6: Xu Bing, *Square Calligraphy Classroom*, 1994.  
Mixed media installation / desk, chair sets, copy  
and tracing books, brushes, ink, video

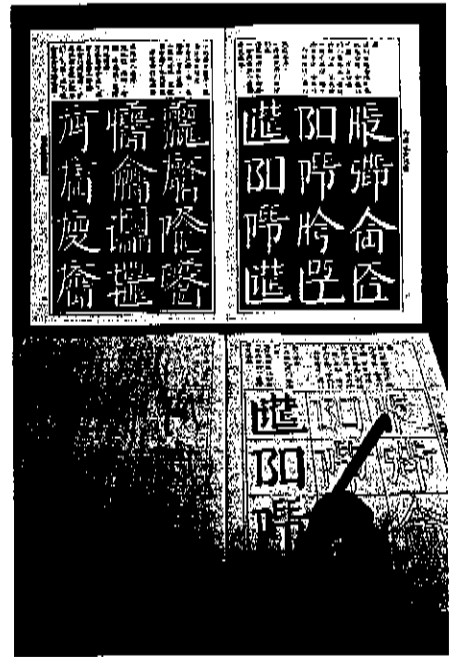


Fig. 7: Xu Bing, *Where Does the Dust Itself Collect?*, 2004.  
Dust. Installation at the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff, 2004

